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ABSTRACT

To elicit facts on areas of family responsibility, how decisions are made, and how the division of labor is managed in the home, 87 middle to upper-middle class married women students at the University of Maryland at College Park were queried via a written questionnaire. Respondents indicated that there had been a change in all areas of decision making, particularly in the home management and family relations areas, since their return to school. The respondents viewed the resultant changes positively, but viewed their spouses' reactions to the changes as being negative. Significant decisions, such as housing, were more frequently discussed, with all discussions being less emotional than before the spouse returned to school. Family members helped more with the management of the home, and husbands assumed more responsibility for the entertainment of the children, grocery shopping, and breakfast preparation. Respondents cited considerably more positive than negative changes as having occured since the return to college. (For the thesis upon which this speech was based, see Note.) (MEK)

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by

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The Integration of School and Family Needs by Women Returning to College

Mary J. Stephenson

The majority of women today, over the age of thirty, are a part of a lost generation. They grew up expecting that home and family would be their lifetime goal, only to find that the rules have been changed. With the advent of feminism in the 60's, they came to realize that home and family may not be enough. They are joining other women their age, as they enter the work-force or the college classroom.

The older woman in the college classroom is no longer a rarity. Of all students 35 or older in 1976, for example, 59 per cent were women, up from 52 per cent the year before. In 1977, women students accounted for 93 per cent of the enrollment increases at colleges and universities in the United States. Many of these were older women (Project on the Status and Education of Women, 1978).

Older women often face special problems when they return to college. As a student they must relearn the skills of studying, writing papers, and taking exams. Competition for grades and faculty approval is an unfamiliar conduct for them, after years in the home. As a housewife and mother they experience increased stress with the added responsibility of being a student. Few studies have been undertaken to determine how women, back in college, handle these responsibilities (Rice, 1979).

This investigation dealt with the effect that the wife and mother has upon the family when she returns to college. The research sought to elicit facts on areas of family responsibility, how decisions are made, and how the division of labor is managed within the home.

Decision making and communicating are fundamental to the dynamic social processes within the family. Decision making involves making choices or resolving alternatives. Deising (1962) has concluded the majority of decisions are socioeconomic in nature. Social decisions are those that focus on selecting the types of roles an individual will play, the specific content the individual will choose to put into these roles, and how this person will integrate these roles into a consistent self.

With the changing status of women, a woman has a wide choice of what roles to play. The woman often develops stress as she fulfills one role out of a sense of duty and wishes she were fulfilling another. What she considers to be desirable roles may be quite disagreeable to her husband. Resolution of these role conflicts is difficult because each partner brought to the marriage his or her own parent model and because the ideal of each is rooted

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in his reference group. These differing role concepts are internalized in terms of values (Nye, 1976).

Deacon and Firebaugh (1975) define economic decisions as those which deal with things that can be measured, such as allocation of resources or the exchange of one resource for another to meet various family goals. Such decisions usually concern education, finances, and the work of the home.

Patterns develop concerning how economic decisions are made. They may be democratic and/or authoritarian depending on the family or the nature of the decision.

Ample research has been completed on who makes decisions and how decisions are made within the household setting. Similarities were found among them. Blood and Hill, in 1970, stated that (1) the husband's job is generally his decision, (2) whether a wife should work outside the home is a mutual decision, (3) areas of high finance, such as life insurance, is a husband's decision, (4) low finance areas such as food, clothing, and children's spending money are in the wife's decision making domain, and (5) the family vacation and family home which affect both partners heavily are essentially joint decisions.

Communication among family members and others in the near environment is so closely interwoven with the decision making process that its significance as a separate process is not widely recognized. Effective communication must be built upon a firm foundation of respect for self and others. Ideal communication occurs most frequently between people who have similar beliefs. values, education, social status, and other attributes (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971). Under the best circumstances communication within the family facilitates problem solving and enhances all aspects of managerial activity.

Pleck (1977) writes that in order for a woman to study or work effectively outside the home, it is necessary for the husband to participate, to a relatively large extent, in the household and in child care tasks so that the pressures that generally fall heavily on the mother of the family may be redistributed more evenly. Many household activities are traditionally prescribed as women's work, and women inside and outside the feminist movement continue to find that housework is regarded primarily as their responsibility. A number of studies indicate that husbands participate more in homemaking tasks when the wife is gainfully employed, however, the amount of help given is not significant (Szinovacy, 1979). When women were assisted in household chores, what they received was help. Responsibility for managing the household remains with the wife (Berheide, Berk and Berk, 1976). This trend is evident for families of working women regardless of social class (Fogarty, Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971).

Walker and Woods (1976), in a time-budget study, found that husbands of employed wives do spend proportionately more time doing most household tasks than housewives' husbands. However, the actual time spent on housework does not increase considerably when the wife goes to work.

In a study to determine the relationship of children's household work to parents' employment decreased in response to mothers' and fathers' longer

employment hours. O'Neill (1979) feels that this suggests that children accomplish more household work if at least one parent is home to supervise them or, perhaps, it suggests that less household work is attempted in multiworker households.

Method

Procedure

A questionnaire was developed and mailed in order to examine the decision making process: (1) satisfaction derived from decisions, (2) discussion of decisions, and (3) consultation of spouse when making a decision. The subjects were asked to indicate their own reactions and also their perception of the husbands reactions to the decisions made within the family. If a change had occurred since their return to college, that change was identified as positive or negative.

The areas of family life about which decisions are made were determined to be housing, family relationships, finance, level of consumption, education, home management, and health. In order to determine whether the subjects saw themselves in the traditional role of housewife and mother they indicated who ought to be responsible for each of these areas.

They further were asked to indicate who took or takes care of the household activities in order to determine change within the division of labor since the wife-mother returned to college. A section evaluated whether the children were of greater help with household tasks since their mothers returned to college.

The data were coded and tabulated acquiring descriptive statistics and one-way frequency distributions in order to describe the sample's view on areas of family responsibility, decision making processes, and how the division of labor is managed within the home.

Sample

A systematic sampling procedure was employed to determine the subjects. The sample consisted of 87 undergraduate married women over thirty with children, and spouse present, who were students at the University of Maryland. In addition, these students had accumulated over 30 credits.

The majority of the subjects and their spouses were between the ages of 30-39, with a mean age of 37.6 for the subjects and 40.7 for their spouses. They had been married an average of 16 years. The mean number of children per family was 2.7. Seventy-seven per cent of these children were of school age K-12. About 10 per cent of the sample had children of preschool age and 12.6 per cent past high school age.

Hollingshead's Two Factor Index of Social Position (1957) was used to estimate the family's social class according to the husband's education and

occupation. The families were from middle to upper middle class, and professional occupations were held by 56 per cent of the husbands. Another 29 per cent held major administrative or managerial positions. The majority (78 per cent) had completed college with 43 per cent having completed some graduate work. Twelve had a master's degree, six had a law degree, and sixteen had their doctorates. This was reflected in income as 76.7 per cent of the subjects reported a total yearly income of $20,000 or more.

Of the 87 subjects, 70 reported a choice of major field in their college education. Of these about three-fourths were majoring in the liberal arts. When asked their occupation, the majority (60 per cent) classified themselves as housewives. Only one subject stated that she had never been gainfully employed. Most (91 per cent) had worked in a skilled or clerical type of employment. All but 17 per cent had worked at sometime since their marriage.

The sample had been back in college an average of 4.2 years. Sixty-eight per cent of them were of full time status. When asked their motivations for returning to college, 30 per cent desired a better job, 26 per cent were seeking self fulfillment and 29 per cent wanted a college degree.

The majority (66 per cent) expected a career of a professional or semi-professional nature. Yet, many (35.6 per cent) were uncertain about their future income. Only two per cent felt they would command an income of $20,000 or more.

Results

Decision Making

The first hypothesis dealt with decision making within the family stating that the wife-mother would take part more in decision making since her return to school. This was supported by the data.

The subjects were questioned as to who within the marriage was responsible for the various areas of family life: housing, family relationships, finance, level of consumption, education, home management, and health. The majority indicated that the responsibilities should be equally shared in all areas. A large percentage saw home management (32.9 per cent) and health (16.5 per cent) as usually the woman's responsibility. Some also viewed finance as usually the man's responsibility (16.3 per cent).

The greatest area of satisfaction derived from decisions in the above areas was in housing (77.6 per cent of subjects and a perceived 78.6 per cent of their husbands). The subjects and their husbands seemed the least satisfied with decisions made in the areas of home management (43.5 per cent of subjects and a perceived 48.2 per cent of their husbands) and family relations (54.1 per cent of subjects and a perceived 46.4 per cent of their husbands).

The subjects viewed the changes which had taken place since they had returned to school as positive: 31.6 per cent positive change in family relations, 40.5 per cent positive change in education, and 30.0 per cent positive change in home management. Opposing this was the prominence of a perceived negative change among the husbands in areas of family relations (23.3 per cent negative change) and in the area of home management (32.9 per cent negative change).

When significant decisions were made between the subject and her husband, the discussion had improved since her return to college. Both she and her husband would listen to each other more often (25.3 per cent), try to understand their spouse's view (30 per cent of the subjects and perceived 26.2 per cent of their spouses), and talk more frequently (26.2 per cent of the subjects and perceived 21.8 per cent of their spouses). In addition the subjects felt they tried to clarify the issue (30.4 per cent) and present the facts (31.6 per cent) more often. The subjects would get emotional less frequently.

When questioned about how often they consulted their spouse before making a decision in the areas of family life, the subjects rarely (30.2 per cent) consulted him in home management. Yet when a major decision, such as in housing, was made the spouses frequently consulted each other (88.2 per cent of subjects and a perceived 83.3 per cent of their husbands). Positive changes took precedence when consulting the spouse in each of the areas of family life, the most prominent positive change in the area of family relations (20 per cent of the subjects and 18.7 per cent of their spouses).

Division of Labor

The second hypothesis stated that a change would take place in the division of labor within the family, with the family members helping with more of the household work. The data supported this.

The household activities which were evaluated were: marketing, household management, household record keeping, food preparation, house care, house maintenance, yard care, care of the car, physical and other care of family members.

When asked directly whether their families helped with more of the household work, the subjects stated that 60 per cent of their husbands helped more often and 44 per cent of their children helped more often, a finding that disagrees with the O'Neill (1979) study. Husbands had helped in all areas to some degree except for diaper changing. The subjects were largely responsible for all household activities except garbage removal, car washing, and making small repairs around the house. These activities were most likely to be done by the husband. The areas in which most change was found was in child care (10.9 per cent to 24.6 per cent depending on type of child care activity), grocery shopping (34.9 per cent), preparation of breakfast (27.9 per cent), and paying the bills and preparing the family budget (12.8 per cent), duties which may be viewed as more masculine or pleasant to accomplish.

There were minimum changes in household management and care, such as cleaning.

Types of Change

The third hypothesis states that negative changes would exceed positive changes. This hypothesis was not supported.

Two-thirds of the subjects stated that all members of their family had reacted positively to their return to college. The remaining subjects felt one or more of their family members was not pleased with their return. With the positive reaction to the wife-mother's return to school occurred positive changes in decision making and division of labor which far exceeded the negative changes. The largest change came in satisfaction derived from decisions (33.2 per cent).

In a space provided, the subjects commented about their family life. The comments reflected and further explained the data. They ranged from positive feelings such as "My return to college has enriched our family life," to the negative, "Male chauvinism reigns." In addition, many of the subjects felt they were more self-assured, had more self-respect, and had gained an independent feeling about themselves.

Conclusions

It is interesting to note that the subjects perceived their husbands as not being satisfied with decisions in the family, especially in the areas of family relations and home management. One would wonder why this is so, since they state that the husband's reaction to their return to college is generally positive. These days most men agree that a wife has a right to go to college or work outside the home if she wants to. Yet, a man may be proud of his wife's accomplishments and still deeply resent her need when it creates a home that is not managed as he is accustomed to. The investigator conjectures that the data may have been quite different had the husband filled out a questionnaire along with his wife.

The subjects made frequent comments regarding the effect the women's movement was having in their lives. From this one could assume they would pursue a career where pay is higher and the opportunity for advancement more obvious. Yet it was found that the majority were enrolled in liberal arts in college. While the idea of equality sounds great, the subjects seem to find it difficult to break away from the traditional role of educator, home economist, librarian, etc.

It appears that the subjects are presently educated to state that responsibility for areas of family life ought to be equally shared with their husbands. Yet, in reality they indicated that in most instances they alone were the ones who were accountable for them. Further study would define how the women's movement, which stresses equality between the sexes, is

really affecting the wife-mother. Is it bringing about internal strife and guilt to women who believe in the ideology of the movement yet are socialized to place the role of housewife and mother first? The study might deal more with the subjects' values, perceptions, and attitudes, as they frequently stated in the written comments, their feelings of guilt when they put their need for education before family needs.

The investigator further ponders the question of divorce and separation due to the wife-mother's return to college. Of the 103 questionnaires returned, 16 were not applicable due to absence of a spouse; though, on the initial mailing, spouses were present. Allowing for the death of one subject's spouse, 15 per cent of the subjects who returned the questionnaire had become separated or divorced. Do women who return to college create an atmosphere of stress which brings about separation and divorce? Or, does the thought of separation send a woman back to college in order to prepare for independence and self support? These are questions which could be answered with additional study.

This study proposed to collect and interpret data regarding areas of family responsibility, how decisions are made, and how the division of labor is managed within the home when the wife-mother returns to college. It was determined that the wife-mother is more active in decision making, receives more help with household work from family members, and that the return to college brings about many changes within the family, mostly for the better. The findings, though revealing, indicate the importance for further study.

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